

Artist Jane Flavell Collins

Recording history in charcoal and chalk

By Karen Wong
Clipper Contributor

Jane Flavell Collins was born to be an artist. From the time she was eight years old, people told her she had an amazing ability to capture accurate drawings of people. Collins was inspired by her older sister who was already in art school when Collins was a young girl, but it was her own talent and drive that lead her to be a courtroom artist covering some of the nation's most notorious criminals.

Jane Flavell grew up in New Hampshire with her parents and two siblings. She remained in New Hampshire after she married Peter Collins. While caring for their three young sons, Collins went to Mass College of Art. In 1976, her family relocated to Duxbury because it was too nice to just visit in the summer.

What Collins lacked in professional artistic experience, she made up for in tenacity. She set up an interview with Channel 5 news to become a courtroom sketch artist. After several months with no word from Channel 5,

Collins got a call at 9 a.m. one morning and was told to be in court in Boston by 9:30 a.m., an impossible feat coming from Duxbury. With overflowing armloads of art supplies, Collins made her way through the crowded gallery of reporters who wouldn't wouldn't make room for her. At the end of the pew, the only available seat had an obstructed view of the defendant. One of the



Jane Flavell Collins was one of the 2016 Alden Kindred Speak for Thyself Awards. The Speak for Thyself Award honors the spirit of Pilgrim Priscilla Mullins Alden, as women who speak up on behalf of themselves or others. At the May 19th event, Collins spoke about the stoic nature of mobster Whitey

reporters told her to go sit up front. Squeezing back by the reporters, she made her way down to the open seat near the front of the courtroom, where she was promptly told to get out of the defendant's chair. At the time, the defendant was on the stand. Red faced but not deterred, Collins finished out her first day as a courtroom illustrator.

"A nice court officer told me it was going to be okay," said Collins.

The next call from Channel 5 came several months later and, over time, she became a very good courtroom sketch artist. Reflecting back on that traumatic first day, Collins remarked that she went on to become friends with the reporter who "kindly" instructed her to sit in the defendant's chair.

Since the 1990s, Collins has covered some of the nation's highest profile cases in Boston's Federal Court including the 'Shoe Bomber' Richard Reid, mobster Whitey Bulger and Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. She is present for the entirety of each trial, carefully observing and drawing not only facial features but the unique body language of the defendants, lawyers, witnesses and judges. Using pencils, charcoal and chalk, Collins has an uncanny ability to capture the

essence of her subjects. The artist takes her time, studying her subjects and the overall courtroom, but she is ever ready for that unpredictable movement she must commit to memory and put on paper as quickly and accurately as possible.

The unexpected happened in 2002 during the trial of Richard Reid the so-called “Shoe Bomber.” At the conclusion of Reid’s sentencing, Judge William Young, who had been “so polite throughout the trial,” according to Collins, told Reid, who tried to blow up an airplane over the ocean between Paris and Miami on December 22, 2001, “You are not a soldier in any war. You are just a terrorist.”

With that, Reid, who at 6’7” with very long arms, went “berserk” and lunged at the judge. Judge Young told Reid to “stand down” and he was promptly escorted out of the courtroom. Collins abandoned the sketch she was working on and quickly began drawing the dramatic courtroom scene. She continued drawing even as the courtroom emptied and the Channel 5 reporters anxiously waited to see her work. Once her drawings were complete, she displayed them in the designated area so the news crew could photograph and video her images for TV viewers.

Collins works for Channel 5, but the sketches belong to her. She has sold some, including one of Whitey Bulger that now hangs in the Mob Museum in Las Vegas. As is often the case with defendants, Bulger never turned around so most of his drawings are from the back or side. The one image of him facing forward was made while Collins sat in the overflow room.

Over the years, Collins has documented many emotional trials. She has a job to do but there are times when she just has to stop and think about what she is witnessing. The trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the surviving Boston Marathon bomber, was a difficult one to get through. “The Marathon is an iconic event we treasure in Boston and the bombing was such a surprise and betrayal,” said Collins. “When they held up the Martin boy’s little teeshirt that was full of holes for all to see, it was just awful.”

Bearing witness to so much tragedy hasn’t jaded Collins. She remains warm and full of energy. She and her husband enjoy their life in Duxbury and Collins has no plans of retiring. “I’ll continue working as long as I can,” she said. “I won’t leave on my own.”



Courtroom artist Jane Flavell Collins described a chilling moment during the Boston Marathon bombing trial.

Photos by Karen Wong